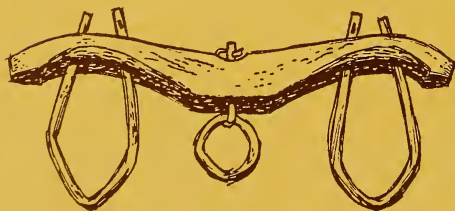


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Lincoln and democracy

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April 1, 1935.

Mr. Albert H. Griffith  
Fisk  
Wisconsin

Dear Mr. Griffith:

It gives me pleasure to comply with your request for a copy of my address on Lincoln and Democracy, which is herewith enclosed.

Yours very truly,

*James M. Beck*





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## LINCOLN AND DEMOCRACY.

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An address delivered at the Lincoln's Day  
Banquet of the Republican Club of New  
York on February 12, 1926, by

JAMES M. BECK,  
Late Solicitor General of the United States.

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THIS is a day of sacred memory. Lincoln has reached that stature among the immortals that any eulogy would be an idle superfluity. One need only say of him as he said of Washington:—

“In solemn awe pronounce the name and in its naked, deathless splendor, leave it shining on.”

Let us recall Lincoln at Gettysburg in November, 1863. If it were possible to test the sense of a thousand of the most cultivated men of the English-speaking world as to its five greatest orations, the Gettysburg address would be on almost every list. The world has long since ranked it in epic

beauty with the oration of Pericles over the fallen of Marathon.

It was a very brief address. Its words, only three hundred and sixty-seven in number, must have been spoken in about two minutes. (What a model after-dinner orator Lincoln would have been!) Its great merit is not in its beautiful and almost faultless diction nor even in its thought, for it contains nothing that Pericles had not uttered twenty-four centuries before. Webster once said that the essential requisites of a great oration are the man, the subject and the occasion. The Gettysburg address lacked none. The speaker, bearing upon his stooping shoulders the weight of a great nation, appeals to the imagination, as that other "Man of Sorrows who was acquainted with grief." The occasion, a moving one, the dedication of new-made graves of the thousands, who has so recently fallen on the field of battle. The subject, the holiness of a just war and the sacredness of martyrdom on the field of battle.

Thus the words he uttered were as the stained-glass windows of an ancient cathedral, for through them shone the light of a noble personality, a sacred subject, and a great occasion. He voiced the great truth that the labors of the dead dedicate the living to that which always was, and always

will be, the great unfinished task of life, for, as Burke once said, society is a sacred compact between the noble dead, the living and the unborn.

In this address there was no suggestion of that spirit of perverted pacificism, now so audible in the world, which condemns war without discriminating between the just and the unjust. We need his solemn admonition today, as to the justice of a just war, for through the veins of the allied nations runs a subtle poison. Increasingly we are now told that in the great World War there was no right or wrong and that all the nations were blindly plunged into an abyss by "war psychosis" or as the inevitable result of an economic fatality.

If this were true, the World War was the ghastliest tragedy that the mind of man can conceive. Our own country, late in the war, lost over one hundred and twenty thousand men. Were they to reassemble at tomorrow's dawn in ghostly array and, in martial formation, march from the Washington Monument to Grant's Tomb, the sun would be setting before the last of this great army had passed a given point. If the dead of France in the World War were to march down the Champs Elysees, it would require fourteen days and fourteen nights before the last heroic victim had passed under the Arc of Triumph. Were

all these men, who went out in the "May morn" of their youth to defend a cause in which they believed, the victims of a delusion? Is the noble thought of the poem, "Flanders' Field," only sentimental folly? Such is the teaching of much of contemporary literature. Pacifist plays and pacifist books multiply. The right and wrong of the great conflict has become confused, but there are still some of us who believe that there was an ever-lasting right and an ever-lasting wrong in the World War, as in the Civil War, and that the men who died to save a liberal civilization in 1914-18 are as the dead of Gettysburg—they consecrate the ground in which they lie.

Lincoln had no such misgivings as to the justice of the war to save the Union. To him it was holy. Nothing in his address suggests the pride that is too great to fight, and nothing accepts as an ideal a "peace without victory." The only pride to which Lincoln gave utterance was the "solemn pride" of the mother who had given all her sons to the cause. Nor did he believe in an inconclusive result as a desideratum, for, in his homely way, he suggested that no question is ever settled until it is settled right, and in his second Inaugural, when the war was still unfinished, he said that the sacrifice of life would go on until

a just result was attained and if it were prolonged until the sufferings of the war were as great as those of slavery, he yet would accept it as a great expiation in the spirit of the ancient prophet, whom he then quoted,

“The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Lincoln was a great moralist. The dominant note of his address was the solemn dedication by the dead of the living to the “unfinished task.” He called upon the living generation and upon all successive generations to take a high resolve “that the dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

This exaltation of popular government was not original with Lincoln, even in its literary form. Webster had used substantially the same words and he, in turn, had been anticipated by John Marshall. All three simply echoed the opening words of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, when, as with the sonorous blast of a mighty trumpet, it said:—

“We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish

justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

It does not follow that Lincoln’s famous phrase as to “government of the people, by the people and for the people” is a mere flourish of rhetoric. Before Gettysburg, the European nations were becoming increasingly unfriendly to the Union. The hereditary ruling classes of nearly every European nation were then aiming by secret diplomacy to destroy this Republic by open intervention. They had determined that government of and by the people should perish from the Earth. The thunder of Meade’s cannon was America’s answer and when the last echo died away in the distant hills, Lincoln could proudly say that “government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

When the framers of the Constitution uttered in trumpet tones the words, “We, the people of the United States, do ordain and establish \* \* \* this Constitution for the United States of America,” popular government was not the accepted commonplace in political science that it has since become. The American people then

were under the age-long feudalistic conception that in some individual or class there existed by divine command, and as an hereditary privilege, that supreme power which we call "sovereignty," and that the rights of the people were only such as the Sovereign might, by grace, concede, or such as could be wrung from him by force. With the Declaration of Independence one hundred and fifty years ago, we rejected the idea of sovereignty. The word will not be found in either the Declaration or the Constitution. Prior to July 4, 1776, we were subjects of George III, and after that date, citizens of the new Republic and as such, its only sovereigns.

Two epoch-making changes were then beginning—the age of the machine and the age of democracy, and both were to advance with the stride of a seven-league giant. A century and a quarter passed, and at the beginning of the World War the conception of the sovereignty of the people was almost universally accepted in Western civilization, even though the form of government might be that of an empire or a monarchy. Democracy had become the great ideal, a "pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night" and our War President gave an inspiring call to battle in 1917, when he said that the "World must be made safe for democracy." And yet this effective

war shibboleth contained one profound misconception. It assumes that democracy is an end, of which the world is simply the means, whereas, in truth, the welfare of the world is the end and democracy is but a means. Forms of government are, in themselves, never ends, but merely means, and there is at least a half truth in Pope's famous couplet:

“For forms of government let fools contest;  
That which is best administered, is best.”

The greatest of all teachers said that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath and similarly democracy is made for man and not man for democracy.

“Democracy” as a form of government means merely the rule of the majority and such rule is no more by divine right than the power of the King. Each must be judged by its works, and the only sanction of democracy is its beneficial effects upon the true welfare of mankind.

When the greatest war of history had ended, and the roar of the last gun on the long battle-line had died away in distant echoes, it seemed indeed that “government of the people, for the people, and by the people” had been vindicated and that the world had been made “safe for democracy.” Never in a thousand years had there been such

a dissolution of ancient forms. Crowns had fallen "thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks of Vallambrosa." Ancient dynasties perished; kingdoms fell and empires of a thousand years vanished into thin air. Indeed, as President Wilson passed through Europe and the masses arose to acclaim him with hysterical enthusiasm, it seemed as if the existing governments of even the victorious nations were crumbling.

And then a mighty change came over the world's dream of democracy. A reaction, swift and terrible, against parliamentary government, through which alone democracy can function, swept over the world like the shadow of a huge eclipse. Russia destroyed the rule of the Czars, but rejected democracy in accepting a class tyranny infinitely worse than the rule of the worst of the Czars. China became a Republic in form and is in a welter of anarchy, with a half dozen would-be dictators struggling for supremacy. Italy accepted the rule of a dictator, who, however beneficent his autocratic rule may be, loses no occasion to flout democracy. Spain accepted the rule of a military dictator, and now democracy has yielded to a dictator in Greece, the very land that gave us not only the idea but the very word democracy.

What is more significant is the disintegration

of parliamentary government in three governments that are in form democratic. In Germany, the paralysis of democracy is so great that its President has threatened a dictatorship unless the state of political chaos is brought to an end. In France, there have been three Cabinets in less than a year and for want of a government that will function, the talk of a dictator grows ever more ominous. England, the mother of democracies and which alone among all the great nations has in the last decade become in form more democratic than any other nation, is, in fact, trembling at the possible domination of a Labor oligarchy, which disdains the organ of democracy, the ballot box, and prefers to work its will by "direct action," an euphonious term for choking the community into submission by a threat of starvation.

Today, one hundred and fifty years after the Declaration of Independence, popular government all over the world seems to be in more serious danger than at any time since Jefferson, like Chanticleer, proclaimed the reddening morn of democracy.

Human progress moves in a constant series of ascending and descending curves or to change the metaphor, its forces are at times centripetal, and at times, centrifugal. Man has, throughout all

history, passed through a ceaseless cycle of integration and disintegration. Every age that has been marked by the concentration of power in the hands of a few has been followed by a redistribution of that power among the many and, in turn, every democratic movement, when it has spent its force, has been succeeded by a period of integration.

Take English history. The autocracy of William the Conqueror was followed by the comparative democracy of Magna Charta, and that was, in turn, succeeded by the absolutism of Edward the First, only, in turn, to be supplanted by the democracy of the Peasants' Revolt. When that had spent its force, there came the absolutism of the Tudors, only to be followed by the execution of Charles the First and the democratic Commonwealth. Then came the Restoration and later the absolutism of the Georges, only to be followed by the Chartist movement, in turn succeeded by the early Victorian reaction towards absolutism. In our time democracy triumphed in the virtual destruction of the political power of the Crown and the House of Lords, and now the "Mother of Democracies" is in the throes of disintegration, as the power of the people passes to the power of a class oligarchy.

No present fact is more significant than the

reaction in many nations against democracy and in favor of one-man power. It matters not whether the one man be called a czar, emperor, king or dictator—the essential fact is his power. Today half of the oldest nations of Europe are in the grasp of dictators. The revolt is not against democracy as a social ideal but against the inefficiency, and venality of parliamentary institutions.

At no time within the memory of living man has Lincoln's ideal of a "government of and by and for the people" been more openly denied and flouted. If the parliamentary system, which we call "democracy," is ineffective, resort will inevitably be had to more ancient forms of power. The World War has revealed, as in a vast illumination, the fact that democracy is not workable unless there be a people who are politically capable of self-government. The founders of our nation recognized this. Washington, Franklin and Hamilton all said that the success of popular government depended less upon its form than upon the moral and intellectual capacity of the people. If they fail to take an intelligent interest in their government, and if they are unprepared to show the spirit of self-restraint, which I have elsewhere called "constitutional morality" there can be no successful democracy.

Moreover, the success of democracy must depend to some extent upon its machinery. It can only be effective through a system of two parties. The moment that the people disintegrate into blocs, it is not the rule of the majority, which we call democracy, that prevails, but, inevitably, the rule of the minority.

Nothing more strikingly illustrates this than the political history of England in the last fifty years. In form it has grown increasingly democratic. The electorate has increased in a century from 500,000 to 21,000,000, and the power of hereditary privilege, as centered in the Crown and House of Lords, is almost non-existent. The disintegration in England in recent years of the party system into at least three blocs, has resulted in minority rule, for the conservative government of Bonar Law and the labor government of Ramsay MacDonald only represented a minority of the people, even as Mr. Wilson's first election was the act of a minority only. The recent history of England, moreover, shows more strikingly than that of any other nation the portentous threat to democracy of the disintegration of the people into classes. The labor movement in England, like that of the Soviets in Russia, has long since lost its faith in the ballot-box or in democracy. The Labor Party believes

in direct action, meaning thereby the coercion of the nation by a threat to destroy the necessities of existence by a general strike. The transport workers, the railway workers and the miners form a powerful triple alliance, and have shown in recent years their power to dictate to the government and even to control its foreign policies. When the Bolshevists were at the gates of Warsaw in 1920, the "triple alliance" notified the government that if it aided Poland, there would be a general strike in England and at once the government succumbed. A similar threat a few years ago resulted in compulsory action by the government to compel the owners of the mines to give up for three months their profits and the government granted a subsidy to the miners of \$50,000,000 to keep the peace. Last summer a like threat was used to compel the nationalization of mines and railways, and all that the impotent government could do was to purchase a peace until next May, by a subsidy to the miners of nearly \$100,000,000.

Let no one in this country be blind to the fact that a successful revolution in England through this power of direct action might have a significant repercussion in this country, and might destroy that "government of the people, by the people and for the people," of which

Lincoln spoke, and for which he gave his heart's blood.

It is easy for a people to be content with popular government when prosperity is general. Let there be in this nation a prolonged period of adversity and our institution, will be brought to a real test and the prophecy of Lord Macaulay, voiced nearly seventy years ago, may have a terrible vindication.

Even with a contented and prosperous people, we have not been altogether free from some movements that are a direct challenge to democracy. It was not so many years ago that the officials of the railroad unions, with stop-watches in their hands, compelled the then President and the Congress of the United States, to pass, at their dictation, a statute of doubtful validity to raise wages artificially and the Supreme Court by a bare majority sustained this unprecedented legislation on the theory of a grave emergency. The doctrine of emergency may be the trojan horse, which will yet subvert the citadel of the Constitution.

Nor have we wholly escaped the destructive effect upon democracy of the bloc system in politics. Much legislation and even amendments to the Constitution have been forced through under the threat of vigorous and well-organized

minorities, which either held the balance of power, or threatened public men with defeat unless they voted against their conscience.

Let us not lay the "flattering unction to our souls" that we have finally and completely solved the great problem of popular government. It is still, to use the words of Lincoln, "an unfinished task," and to it the living, from generation to generation, must still dedicate themselves. Our institutions are not static but always in a state of flux. The sound instinct of the American people still accepts democracy. In determining its merits as in every other problem, regard must be had for the ponderables and the imponderables. Judged by the former only, our faith in democracy would be weakened, for its inefficiency, waste, and at times venality cannot be doubted. But the American people believe in it, because of a great imponderable, that it is the only form of government consistent with the self-respect of a proud people, that it gives hope to the masses, and raises them in intellectual and moral stature. The average man, even when punged in the "slough of despond" of an inefficient and at times corrupt government, sees beyond the "delectable mountains," and he struggles out of the morass and plunges bravely on to the heights beyond. Such was the spirit

of Washington and Lincoln and it is this invincible faith, triumphing over fear, that has made them the two great leaders of the American people. As long as democracy can produce two such leaders, it vindicates itself.

It must also be remembered that the comparative success of popular government in America is due in large part to the Constitution of the United States, which is not wholly democratic nor wholly undemocratic. That great charter of government rejected the idea that the majority ruled by divine right. It provided that, within a limited sphere of governmental action, the majority, as indicated by their representatives, should have their will; that, as to certain questions, such as our foreign relations, only a largely preponderating majority, as evidenced by two-thirds of the Senate, should have their will, and that the form of government—the highest exercise of governmental power—should not be changed unless three-fourths of the States should concur. Democracy was further restrained by the system of checks and balances in the governmental structure, the fixed tenures of office and, above all, by the power of the Supreme Court to declare null and void any statute, even though it were passed by the Senate and the House unanimously and approved by

the President, if it violates the inalienable rights of the individual.

Abraham Lincoln devoutly believed that the Constitution was the whole "law and the prophets" of popular government.

His faith in that Constitution has been amply vindicated, for in all the violent storms of the last twenty-five years, in which all forms of government have been shaken to their very foundations, the most stable has been that of the Constitution of the United States. Today it is the oldest comprehensive written form of government in the world. "We, the people" ordained it and "We, the people" must preserve it.

Well can we recall on Lincoln's Birthday his concluding words at Gettysburg:—

"Let us here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth."











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